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GLOBAL BIOTECHNOLOGY FORUM

Note by the Secretariat

Provides information on the Global Biotechnology Forum to be convened at Concepción, Chile, in December 2003.

Introduction

1. The potential of biotechnology to benefit the developing world is still greatly underused for a number of complex and inter-related reasons. At the international level, technical assistance treats biotechnology as second-order priority not only because of shrinking budgets but also, in many cases, on account of public opposition in donor countries. At the same time, most of the major international policy initiatives focus on trade and regulation rather than on mechanisms facilitating effective technology development and transfer. As a result, the focus on regulatory and trade issues has eclipsed the debate on the main issue: how can biotechnology contribute to sustainable development? Or, in other words, how can biotechnology address problems that are intractable to conventional technologies, or harness new opportunities in ways that improve social welfare and ensure environmental sustainability?

2. Aware of this need, the Government of Chile requested UNIDO, in its capacity as Task Master for Chapter 16 of Agenda 21,[1] to organize a Global Biotechnology Forum. The Forum will explore—in a balanced, all-inclusive manner and in the light of recent developments—policy, socio-economic, technology and management issues that have a bearing on the development and accessibility of biotechnologies capable of contributing to sustainable development. Moreover, the Forum is consistent with activities foreseen in the medium-term programme framework, 2002-2005, adopted by the General Conference at its ninth session (GC.9/ Res.2), for strengthening industrial capacities.

3. This major international event, to be held at Concepción, Chile, in December 2003, will bring together leading representatives of government, development agencies, industry, the scientific community, academia and the general public. It will be preceded by a series of regional consultations intended to generate insights and help structure the Forum agenda.

4. The estimated cost of the Forum, including all preparatory consultations, meetings and reports, will be in the range of $1 million. The Government of Chile is expected to contribute towards this amount, as are the Governments that will host the preparatory regional meetings. Additional contributions will be sought from various foundations and individual donor countries.

[1] In September 1993, the United Nations Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development approved the designation of UNIDO as Task Master on Biotechnology (Chapter 16 of Agenda 21).

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I. THE FOCUS OF THE FORUM: THEMES AND ISSUES

5. The Forum will provide a much-needed opportunity for a broad and informed debate on five critical questions:

- Why is biotechnology of strategic importance?
- Why is it that so far biotechnology has not benefited the developing world or countries with economies in transition?
- How can innovation capability be enhanced in the developing world and transition economies?
- Can mechanisms be designed that would facilitate the transfer of biotechnology to these countries?
- Can biotechnology help conserve biodiversity?

6. Technology considerations by themselves make a very strong case for the strategic importance of biotechnology as a powerful means of addressing intractable problems in health care, food supply and environmental protection and remediation. This potential, however, has to be considered in the context of resource availability and a complex interplay of institutional and market factors.

7. In the case of biopharmaceuticals, the resource and commercial requirements are prohibitively high for the domestic development or adaptation of technology. Therefore, in the near term at least, biotechnology is likely to reach most developing countries and transition economies in the form of traded or licensed products. In the case of agro-food and processing industries, the threshold barriers are considerably lower and, consequently, the potential of biotechnology to meet socio-economic needs and enhance industrial competitiveness in the near future is much greater.

8. The emerging knowledge networks can play a crucial role in fostering innovation capability in developing countries and transition economies by accelerating the progress to reach a level of critical-mass expertise. Such networks can generate sizeable savings in research time and investment and are particularly appropriate as a tool in South-South cooperation since they greatly facilitate synergies and the sharing of resources.

9. The effectiveness of any mechanism designed to promote and facilitate the transfer of biotechnology to the developing world would largely depend on regulatory compliance and realistic expectations of mutual benefits. Regulatory compliance involves protection of human health and the environment as well as of intellectual property rights in accordance with national laws and international conventions. Access to emerging markets and indigenous genetic resources can make a strong case of tangible benefits for technology owners; a less tangible but nevertheless attractive gain is the favourable publicity that owners can expect from technology transfers intended to address major health care and food security problems.

10. Development cannot be sustainable without adequate stewardship of the planet's genetic, taxonomic and ecosystem diversity, and a fact that cannot be easily overlooked is that a very high percentage of the world's biological diversity resides in a few tropical and sub-tropical countries. With its enormous evolutionary significance, genetic diversity can greatly benefit from the application of biotechnological tools and techniques, and biotechnology holds the best promise to combat the erosion seen in the gene pools of many species extremely useful to humans.

11. By debating the issues within the framework outlined above, the Forum will seek to:

- Identify priority needs and opportunities;
- Examine policy options in the context of what is technologically feasible and desirable;
- Explore possibilities of managing the development and transfer of biotechnology in ways that are acceptable to all parties involved.

II. THE ROAD TO THE FORUM

12. An International Organizing Committee of eminent scientists and experts in technology transfer will guide the preparation of the Forum agenda, which will be based on the insights and recommendations yielded by four regional consultative meetings. All stakeholders will take part in these regional consultations: policy makers, business associations, the scientific community, international agencies involved in technology transfer, and consumer groups and other public interest organizations.

13. The tentative schedule of the regional meetings is as follows:

January 2003	Africa
February-March 2003	Latin America and the Caribbean
April-May 2003	Central and Eastern Europe
June-July 2003	Asia and the Pacific

III. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE BOARD

14. The Board may wish to take note of the information provided in the present document.